

## *Through* a Gender Lens: ISSUE BRIEF

# TEEN PREGNANCY AND PARENTING

## *Community Concern, Community Solutions*

*The educational, social and financial costs that result from teen pregnancy are significant. Our report, **Through a Gender Lens: The Economic Security of Women and Girls in Forsyth County**, touched on the linkage between teen pregnancy and its impact on the economic security of young parents. This issue brief looks at the impact of teen pregnancy and early parenting on the larger community and examines how our entire community can take shared responsibility in addressing this issue.*



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THE WOMEN'S FUND OF WINSTON-SALEM



# A COMMUNITY CONCERN

TEEN PREGNANCY AND CHILDBEARING have an impact on a variety of critical issues including educational attainment, poverty and income, overall child well-being, and health. While each of these issues impacts the individual parent and child, they also have a significant impact and cost to our community as a whole. Forsyth County experienced a 20% decrease in the number of teen pregnancies from 2009 to 2010—from 794 to 636.<sup>1</sup> While this drop is significant, further reduction in the number of pregnant and parenting teens should be a critical goal for our community. After all, teen pregnancy does not just affect teens—it affects all of us.

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

There is a very strong relationship between teen pregnancy and academic failure. Nationally, 30% of girls cited pregnancy or parenting as a reason for dropping out of high school.<sup>2</sup> In the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school district, only 48% of teen mothers graduated from high school with their class in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Educational attainment is a major determinate of employment and financial stability. Failure to obtain at least a high school diploma puts these young mothers at serious risk of a lifetime of low-wage work. This leads to significant community costs in lost wages, taxes, productivity and consumer buying power over their lifetimes, and low-skilled, uneducated workers diminish our economic competitiveness. The negative outcomes do not end with the mother, as the children of teen mothers do not perform as well as the children of older mothers on measures of child development and school readiness, and they don't do as well in school.<sup>4</sup>

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## POVERTY AND INCOME

Poverty is both a cause as well as a consequence of teen pregnancy. Studies have found that two-thirds of families headed by young unmarried mothers are poor.<sup>5</sup> Teen mothers are also more likely to need various forms of public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, food stamps, housing assistance and publicly provided healthcare.



## CHILD WELL-BEING

In addition to being more likely to live in poverty and have lower educational attainment, children born to teen mothers are at increased risk for a variety of social and health problems, all of which are likely to create additional cost burdens on the community as a whole. The children of teen mothers are twice as likely to suffer abuse and neglect and end up in the foster care system.<sup>6</sup> When compared to the children of mothers who had a child at age 20-21, the sons of teen mothers are two times as likely to end up in prison and the daughters of teen mothers are three times more likely to become teen mothers themselves.<sup>7</sup>

## COSTS TO OUR COMMUNITY

According to an analysis by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, teen childbearing in North Carolina cost taxpayers at least \$392 million in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Fifty-eight percent of these costs are state and local costs; teen childbearing cost Forsyth County tax payers at least \$15,172,500 in 2008.<sup>9</sup> Most of the costs of teen childbearing are associated with negative consequences for the children of teen mothers, including increased costs for health care, foster care, incarceration, and lost tax revenue.

# COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

THE EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL COSTS to our community resulting from teen pregnancy are significant. We must share the responsibility for identifying meaningful solutions that lead to healthy outcomes for all of our children. The factors that contribute to teen pregnancy are too complicated for a single organization or intervention to solve. To address this issue, we need broad community involvement from the following key stakeholder groups:

## PARENTS

Polling by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reveals that parents are the number one influence when it comes to their teenager's decision to have sex, and 80% of teens said that it would be much easier for them to delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.<sup>10</sup> While these kinds of conversations may be difficult for some, parents should talk to their kids throughout their lives about what they believe and value and how to act responsibly and respect themselves.

## SCHOOLS

In a 2009 statewide survey of parents, 91.8% of respondents thought sexuality education should be taught in public schools,<sup>11</sup> and the 2009 Healthy Youth Act requires that our schools provide objective and medically accurate information about sexuality and ways to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It is important that our school district meets these standards to give both boys and girls the information they need to help them prevent teen pregnancy. It is also important that our schools implement programs and policies that support teen mothers in their efforts to continue their education.

Just as teen pregnancy and parenting often have a negative impact on a young woman's educational attainment, positive school achievement, attendance and engagement help to prevent teen pregnancy. Therefore, programs to help struggling students succeed in school are a critical component of teen pregnancy prevention.

## FAITH COMMUNITIES

Research has shown that religious involvement and a strong moral sense can help protect young people from early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. In addition to instilling a strong sense of morals and values, our religious institutions have the ability to make a connection between parents and teenagers by providing helpful, open and supportive guidance to both groups and educational programs that help them understand sexuality in the context of their faith and spiritual values.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Many community organizations play a key role in providing our youth with programs that guide their development, help them stay in school, and assist them in envisioning a positive future. After-school programs that provide mentoring, employment, opportunities for self-expression and other affirming, productive activities keep both boys and girls in safe settings. Engagement with adult role models promotes positive youth development and is an essential component of teen pregnancy prevention.

## HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

Adolescent health care providers can play an important role by talking to youth and their parents about these issues and finding ways to make their services more accessible to all youth.

*Only through a community-wide effort can we provide adolescents in our community with the guidance, support and resources they need to make healthy choices that will help them prevent teen pregnancy while on their journey to becoming mature, contributing adults.*

- ~ The importance of open and honest conversations between parents and teens about sex cannot be overstated.
- ~ School districts must be held accountable for meeting the standards required by the Healthy Youth Act.
- ~ Faith communities can help families understand sexuality in the context of faith and spiritual values.
- ~ Community-based after-school programs are critical in promoting healthy and positive youth development.
- ~ Accessibility of adolescent health care services and the role of providers are also critical prevention components.



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[www.womensfundws.org](http://www.womensfundws.org)  
[info@womensfundws.org](mailto:info@womensfundws.org)

VISIT THE TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTION RESOURCE CENTER on our website ([womensfundws.org](http://womensfundws.org)) to learn more about what parents, our schools, community and faith-based organizations, health care providers, adolescents and you can do to help prevent teen pregnancy in our community.

FOR AN OVERVIEW OF LOCAL TRENDS in teen pregnancy and birth data, please see the *Making Progress Report: Physical & Mental Health 2012* by Forsyth Futures ([forsythfutures.org](http://forsythfutures.org)).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Making Progress Report: Physical & Mental Health 2012*. Forsyth Futures, January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Why it Matters: Teen Pregnancy and Education*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Email communication with Faith Lockwood, School Social Worker for Teen Parents and Their Families, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, 01/11/12.

<sup>4</sup> *Why it Matters: Teen Pregnancy and Education*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *Why it Matters: Teen Pregnancy, Poverty and Income Disparity*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman, S. (2006). *By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

<sup>7</sup> *Why it Matters: Teen Pregnancy and Overall Child Well-Being*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, March 2010.

<sup>8</sup> *Counting it Up: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing in North Carolina in 2008*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, June 2011.

<sup>9</sup> *Counting it Up* Cost of Teen Childbearing Calculator, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy website: <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/costs/calculator.asp>.

<sup>10</sup> Albert, B. (2010). *With One Voice 2010: America's Adults and Teens sound off about Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

<sup>11</sup> *North Carolina Parent Opinion Survey of Public School Sexuality Education: An Update to the 2003 Survey*. UNC Survey Research Unit, April 2009.